

## ANALYSIS OF MACARTHUR'S REPUDIATION OF INCARNATIONAL SONSHIP

September 10, 1999 (Fundamental Baptist Information Service, P.O. Box 610368, Port Huron, MI 48061, 866-295-4143, wayoflife.org, fbns@wayoflife.org) - The following is by George Zeller, Associate Pastor, Middletown Bible Church, 349 East Street, Middletown, CT 06457. 203-346-0907 (voice), georgezeller@juno.com (e-mail) --

My response and analysis of John MacArthur's recent statement in which he repudiated the doctrine of incarnational Sonship:

I have read carefully John MacArthur's document entitled Reexamining the Eternal Sonship of Christ which I received on 9/1/99 from Phillip Johnson, a member of John MacArthur's staff. I want to say, first of all, that I am very thankful to God for what Dr. MacArthur shared and for his very clear affirmation of Christ's eternal Sonship and his abandonment of the doctrine of incarnational Sonship. [See the article "John MacArthur Repudiates His Heresy of Incarnational Sonship" under the "Evangelical" section of the End Times Apostasy Only Database at the Way of Life Literature web site -- <http://wayoflife.org/~dcloud>.] May God be pleased to use this document for the edification of believers everywhere and to help them understand the true significance of Christ's Sonship. I find myself giving a hearty "Amen" most everything that he said, though my understanding of "this day" in Psalm 2 would be more in line with Dr. Renald Shower's exposition of this passage (see chapter 8 in The Eternal Sonship of Christ), that day referring to the day of the resurrection (Acts 13:33). MacArthur's understanding of this passage, however, is certainly within the bounds of sound orthodoxy. Again, I sincerely thank God for his reversal on this issue and his willingness to humbly admit and acknowledge that his earlier teaching on Christ's Sonship was not in line with Scripture.

In spite of MacArthur's great reversal on this issue, I do have some lingering concerns which I have shared with him in a recent communication. They are as follows:

1) As most of you know, MacArthur's teaching of incarnational Sonship triggered a great amount of controversy in the IFCA which lasted for years and which resulted in scores of men (including myself) and a number of churches leaving the IFCA [Independent Fundamental Churches of America]. These men who left were merely defending the doctrine of the eternal Sonship of Christ which MacArthur now strongly affirms. And yet in 1989 MacArthur appeared at the National Convention in Limerick defending the incarnational Sonship view, and in 1991 he wrote his booklet "The Sonship of Christ" defending this same doctrine which he now says was in error. The damage all of this did to our fellowship of Churches was inestimable. I am NOT blaming John MacArthur for what happened. I believe the burden of responsibility rested on the IFCA leadership. But the fact remains that it was his teaching that triggered the controversy. My point is simply this: In MacArthur's recent document, I would wish there could have been some statement of remorse or regret over the damage that took place in the IFCA I know that I personally would be deeply grieved if something I taught had triggered a tremendous controversy in a fellowship of churches resulting in great damage and division. Especially so if I later concluded that my teaching had been in error. "Be not many teachers knowing that we shall receive the greater judgment" (James 3:1). Knowing the terror of the Lord we persuade men.

2) In MacArthur's document he mentioned certain "outspoken critics" who accused him of attacking the deity of Christ or questioning His eternity. This is the same charge that he made in his booklet written in 1991, "The Sonship of Christ" in which he said the following: "In recent months a few vocal critics have raised doubts about my orthodoxy, based on written statements I made about the sonship of Christ in my New Testament commentary

series. Some of these critics seem to imply that my position is incompatible with the doctrine of Christ's deity....Nothing I have written can legitimately be twisted to suggest that I have in any way been unclear or equivocal about the deity and eternality of Christ" (pages 2,4). MacArthur has accused his critics of charging him with a denial of the deity of Christ and His eternality but these charges, to the best of my knowledge, are totally false. In our book THE ETERNAL SONSHIP OF CHRIST we make it very clear that those who hold to incarnational Sonship do not deny the deity of Christ or His eternality: "Most of them, however, say that He became the Son of God at the incarnation. They believe that the Lord Jesus Christ, before his incarnation in the womb of the virgin Mary, was the eternal Word, the eternal God, and even the second Person of the Trinity, but He was not the eternal Son....Such teachers do not deny the deity of Christ, and for this we can be thankful. They do not deny the eternal existence of Christ....They teach that Christ was always God but that He BECAME the Son" (pages 30-31). The same clarification was made in my rebuttal to MacArthur's booklet, "The Sonship of Christ." This is what I wrote: "We are thankful that MacArthur holds to the deity of Christ and to His eternality. Our concern is that He denies that Christ is the ETERNAL SON OF GOD....MacArthur makes His Sonship merely a ROLE and a TITLE which He assumed when He was born....We have never accused MacArthur of denying the full deity and eternality of Christ" (pages 3-4). Why does John MacArthur continue to charge us with accusing him of attacking Christ's deity and eternal existence? Perhaps he has in mind other vocal critics that I am unaware of that have made such a charge. I was deeply involved on the side of those men who were seeking to defend the eternal Sonship of Christ and who were convinced that the IFCA doctrinal statement did not allow for the other view. None of these men, to my knowledge, accused MacArthur of denying Christ's deity. If we did not do this, who did? I would be interested in knowing who these false accusers were.

3) MacArthur, in his most recent statement, said that the incarnational Sonship view was "by no means rank heresy." As he continues to examine this doctrine in the light of Scripture, my hope is that he will come to see the incarnational Sonship view as serious error. It is far more serious than the case of a pastor who teaches that one of the two witnesses is Enoch and later changing his mind to Elijah. It is far more serious than the case of a Pastor who taught that Antichrist was a Jew and later changing it to a Gentile. Though everything the Bible teaches is important, the IFCA would never deal with such matters in their doctrinal statement. But the IFCA doctrinal statement does touch upon the matter of eternal Sonship in two places. To teach that Christ did not become the Son until Bethlehem is serious error that has far reaching ramifications. I have pointed out these ramifications in Chapter 10 of our book, THE ETERNAL SONSHIP OF CHRIST. Also very helpful in this is Philpot's book, THE ETERNAL SONSHIP OF CHRIST. MacArthur gave the impression in his recent statement that this doctrinal change was not very significant and that the incarnational Sonship view, though a minority view, still falls within the boundaries of orthodoxy. With this I would strongly disagree.

4) The IFCA doctrinal statement clearly sets forth the fact that Christ is the eternal Son of God and that He has eternally existed as the Son of God: "We believe that the Lord Jesus Christ, the eternal Son of God, became man." "We believe in one Triune God, eternally existing in three Persons-Father, Son and Holy Spirit." Compare this first statement with John 1:14-"the Word became flesh." It is obvious that He existed as the Word before He became flesh. Likewise, "the eternal Son of God became man." It is obvious that He existed as the Son of God before He became a man, according to this statement. How then can a person believing in incarnational Sonship give his hearty agreement to these statements? It would have been very helpful if MacArthur's document had included an acknowledgment and an affirmation that the IFCA doctrinal statement does indeed set forth the doctrine of eternal Sonship and that a person who holds the other view cannot sign this statement with honesty and integrity and wholehearted agreement.

5) I am concerned, as MacArthur is, about his many commentaries and booklets and tapes which set forth the incarnational Sonship position, sometimes in very strong terms: "The Bible nowhere speaks of the eternal Sonship of Christ" (etc.). Incarnational Sonship is also hinted at in his Study Bible notes and in his school's doctrinal statement. The problem comes when people read these published materials and they may not realize that he no longer holds to the incarnational Sonship position. I don't have a solution for this, unless he tries to fix some of these things each time one of these books is reprinted.

Again, I am very thankful that John MacArthur is now teaching and preaching the doctrine that Christ has eternally existed as the Son of God and that it was the eternal Son of God who became flesh at Bethlehem. This is a giant step in the right direction. May the Lord continue to deal with his heart about these important matters. May we all be in the place to learn, re-learn and un-learn and to amend our thinking in favor of God's Revelation.

Sincerely in Christ our Lord,

George Zeller  
September 1999

---

See also the following articles in the "Evangelical" section of the End Times Apostasy Only Database at the Way of Life Literature web site -- <http://wayoflife.org/~dcloud> --

"John MacArthur Repudiates His Heresy on the Eternal Sonship of Christ"  
"Why Did John MacArthur Sign the IFCA Doctrinal Statement?"